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Hi, my name is Guillermo

From surviving gay conversion therapy to thriving at Whittier



Jillian Spaulding
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“Hi, my name is Guillermo and I’m a raaaaaging homosexual.”

Guillermo Giron is excited about telling his story and those are the first words out of his mouth when I turn on the microphone and encourage him to let it rip. We argue for a minute about deleting that bit, but he quickly agrees that it has to be a part of the story.

Then, he says, smiling, “It’s gonna get fucking tragic.”

Giron is a fourth-year who is double majoring in Psychology and French. He went to a STEM high school in Cleveland, Ohio that was praised for its progressive teaching by president Obama. Despite being at the top of his program, the moment Giron came to Whittier, he realized psychology was something he was particularly interested in.

It’s no wonder, considering what he’s been through.

“How was growing up in Ohio?” I ask my friend.

“Sooo much fun,” Giron deadpans. “In high school, my freshman year, I started to realize I was gay, and even before that, in elementary school, kids called me queermo... That was just foreshadowing I guess.”

Giron dated girls until deciding to come out his junior year in high school. He describes his life from that point on as an “inescapable living hell.”

Before he officially came out, his parents sent him to therapy. “I wouldn’t call it gay conversion just yet. It was more like mini-therapy sessions with the priests who were like, ‘By the way gay is bad,’” says Giron.

Rather than being liberated by his decision to come out, Giron says he was brutally bullied. “I was chased through the streets by homeless who wouldn’t accept my money. I bleached my hair my senior year so it was really obvious... Well to everyone except my parents who chose to deny it.”

. . .

“I was a totally different person when I came back from college. I was happier for one. What the Church and conversion therapy does is completely destroy that person.”

At Whittier, Giron began to both accept and express himself more openly.

“My first year at Whittier I got comfortable with my sexuality, too comfortable,” he laughs. “Like my outfit choices were disgusting! I think I wore every color of the rainbow *everyday*.”

Giron was so happy to be in a place where he could meet people who got to know him before they decided whether or not to like him. “People still judged me,” he says, “but

because of my outfit choices not because I was gay.”

He went home after his first year finally feeling the liberation that had escaped him when he first started coming out in high school. He decided to officially come out to his parents, who promptly forced him into conversion therapy under the threat of being kicked out and disowned. (According to a study conducted by The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, more than 45 percent of homeless youth also identify as LGBT+.)

Giron’s “treatment” consisted of electroshock therapy, which is still legal and practiced in Ohio and 33 other states. “They would hook me up in a chair like one you could get at Rite Aid, attach little suction cups to me that were connected to a machine that had levels of shock,” says Giron.

These sessions were led by his parish priest and relied on conditioning techniques that were meant to repel desire towards same sex partners.

Giron explains that conversion therapy has two levels. “The first was the shock therapy which is meant to completely tear you down... I was a totally different person when I came back from college. I was happier for one. What the church and conversion therapy does is completely destroy that person,” he says. “The second step is to build the person up in the church’s eyes. This includes drilling into the person that all the good things in their life will be destroyed because they are gay as well as all bad things that are coming because of their ‘decision.’ This isn’t enough to make you believe it, but it is enough to seriously affect your psyche.”

Conversion or “reparative therapy” as it is sometimes called is not ethical in the eyes of the American Psychological Association. It destroyed Giron’s psyche in more ways than he could have imagined. He was told if he ever wanted to come home, he would have to continue the conversion therapy. By the time he returned home for the Christmas break of his sophomore year, he had developed anxiety and depression. This was chalked up to him being gay — nothing to do with the electroshock treatments.

Giron’s doctor in Cleveland, a good Catholic, agreed and prescribed high doses of

medications that only made Giron feel worse when he went off the drugs. Giron says these were the darkest days of his life, when he wouldn't leave his room. He was skipping classes and isolating himself. Finally, when he returned home for Christmas break last year, he refused conversion therapy.

"If I had done another round it would have killed me," he says. Nonetheless, he was kicked out of the house.

"If I had done another round it would have killed me."

. . .

Giron returned to Whititer and started going to the Hsi Lai Temple where he practiced Buddhism and learned patience. He then pledge Lancer Society, which helped him face and conquer a fear of men brought on by the the electoshock treaments and the bullying he suffered in Cleveland. "I would flinch away from them. I didn't trust them. They were a threat."

Joining Lancer gave him hope as well as 15 guys he calls his brothers, whom he loves dearly. "Even though they're trash," he jokes.

Guillermo doesn't fear for himself so much now as he does for the kids who now live in a country in which the Vice President has been accused of supporting conversion therapy and in which the Republican candidate for Senate, Roy Moore, ran on anti-gay rhetoric. "It's terrifying and it's disgusting," says Giron.

"Guillermo is courageous, he tackles everything head on."

Fourth-year Kent Tran has been friends with Giron for three years and his roommate for two. “He’s changed so much since freshman year,” says Tran. “Everyone is immature when they come to college, but with Guillermo it was different there was...innocence, too.

Tran recalls how deeply depressed Giron would appear when he returned to Whittier from home, after the conversion therapy. “He’s from Cleveland, which isn’t the most informed or progressive place, but Whittier was a sanctuary, says Tran. “He looked like shit everyday, but he taught me how to take care of someone and care about someone so much,” says Tran. “He’s one of the best friends I have ever made.”

Thanks to Giron, says Tran, his eyes have been opened to wider perspectives and the true meaning of diversity. He says he’s now more knowledgeable and active in human rights and that he hopes he can use what he learned in helping to take care of Giron out in the world beyond Whittier.

“Guillermo is courageous, he tackles everything head on,” says Tran. “I know he’s going to do great things.”

As for Tran, Giron says simply that without him, he “wouldn’t be graduating this year, wouldn’t be this happy, wouldn’t be alive.”

• • •

Shut the fuck up, bitch!”

Giron is bellowing at Emily Crennen, playfully pushing the fourth-year with enough force to just about budge a flower. Crennen’s eyes narrow, but the corners of her mouth turn upward into a smile. Giron and Crennen are close friends, but they nag each other like siblings do.

The two connected during those tense and sometimes lonely first few days of freshman year after discovering a mutual love for One Direction when Emily noticed Niall Horan on Giron’s screensaver.

“We bonded a bit after that, but he was a social butterfly so we didn’t really get super close until junior year. He was involved in just about everything, and almost everyone knew him,” says Crennen. “He lived on my couch for half a semester and during that time. We got closer than I could have imagined. He’s someone who I love coming home to and just telling about my day. He’s the best listener, and if he’s there he is fully there with you and that’s something you don’t get very often.”

When asked what comes to mind first when she thinks of her friend, Crennen does not hesitate. “Resilient,” she says. “He just bounces back all the time. I know he’s going to do great things.”

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